

'Guru' Hari Singh



Harbans Singh

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To his followers 'Guru' Hari Singh, was the younger brother of Baba Ram Singh, founder of the Namdhari or Kuka movement. He was born in September 1819, the son of Bhai Jassa Singh and Mata Sada Kaur of Rilpur Raian (now Bhaini Sahib) in Ludhiana district.

He lived the life of a householder in his native village untill the time his elder brother, on the Baisakhi day of 1857, formally declared himself to be the initiator of the Namdhari movement. Buddh Singh was among the first batch of disciples to be initiated by Baba Ram Singh, and he undertook the responsibility of looking after the ever-increasing stream of devotees who flocked to Bhaini Sahib to have a glimpse of the new leader and to receive 'nam' or initiation into the new sect.

Baba Ram Singh had no male offspring. Therefore, when he was seized by police on 18 January 1872 for transportation to Burma, Baba Buddh Singh took over the reins of the nascent community as its caretaker religious head. It was during 1874 that one Darbara Singh, a Kuka devotee, met Baba Ram Singh at Rangoon and brought from there the latter's hukamnama or written order formally nominating Buddh Singh as the successor his and renaming him Hari Singh.

With the ruthless suppression by the British of the Namdharis, banishment of Baba Ram Singh, and posting of a police picket at Bhaini Sahib, the movements of Baba Buddh Singh (Hari Singh) were restricted to the village itself. While this limited active religious preaching by him, he did not abandon the anti-British policies and programme of his predecessor.

The boycott of British goods, courts and educational institutions by Kukas continued and contacts with the rulers of Kashmir and Nepal, already established, were maintained. These contacts had not been fruitful because the British were too powerful for these insignificant local states to be partners in any plot against them or to permit any anti-British activity within their territories.

However, a new situation was developing across the northwestern borders of India of which Baba Buddh Singh decided to take full advantage. Europe's sleeping giant, Russia, had risen from a long slumber and was stretching its limbs to the West and the East. After her ambitions in the West had been frustrated by her defeat at the hands of the British in the Crimean War (1854-56), Russia diverted her attention to Central Asia. Bokhara became a dependency of Russia in 1866, Samarkand was acquired in 1868, followed by Khiva in 1873. A

new province of Russian Turkistan bordering on Afghanistan was formed and a Russian base established at Tashkent.

British involvement in the second Anglo Afghan war from 1878 onwards brought the British face to face with their strong rival, Russia. Baba Buddh Singh deputed Suba Gurcharan Singh, a Kuka preacher who knew Pashto and Persian, to contact the Russians. It is not known how many times and with what success Gurcharan Singh visited the Russians, but a letter from a British spy, Gulab Khan, confirms his return from Central Asia to Afghanistan on 1 May 1879, and his being honoured by the Russians during a subsequent visit on 1 October 1879. He was told on this latter occasion "to return to the Punjab and strengthen the friendship between the Russians and the Kukas." A later statement of the spy mentions that "on 9 April 1880 Gurcharan Singh sent another letter to Samarkand... This was from Baba Ram Singh, but in the handwriting of his younger brother (Baba Buddh Singh alias Hari Singh)." Gulab Khan, the spy, met Gurcharan Singh at Peshawar and won his confidence posing as a Russian secret agent and got from him two letters for Russian officers which he made over to the Commissioner of Peshawar. Gurcharan Singh, however, was not arrested there and was allowed to return to Bhaini Sahib, in India, and was ultimately apprehended at his native village Chakk Pirana (or Chakk Ramdas) in Sialkot district. Gulab Khan also met Baba Buddh Singh on 3 January 1881 and won the latter's full confidence.

The detention of Gurcharan Singh did not dampen the Baba's enthusiasm for secret negotiations with the Russians. These continued through another Kuka missionary, Suba Bishan Singh. Upon the arrival of Maharaja Duleep Singh in Russia in 1887, Bishan Singh met him and the two together made-up plans to secure Russian support for invading the Punjab. The invasion, however, never took place, and Baba Buddh Singh's plans aborted.

From 1890 onwards, Baba Buddh Singh diverted his attention to preaching Namdhari doctrines and consolidating the Kuka movement in the Punjab. He died at Bhaini Sahib on Saturday, Jeth vadi 10, 1963 Bk/19 May 1906.

Source: Encyclopaedia of Sikhism - Harbans Singh